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ABSTRACT

This issue, the second in a series on how public education will evolve in the new century, focuses on the suburbs, highlighting two suburban communities in the Atlanta, Georgia, region. The first part, "Remodeling Suburbia," explains that in newer suburbs, enrollment is booming, and schools struggle to keep up with growth and changes in student populations. In older suburbs, many of which have already seen dramatic demographic changes, enrollments may become more international as immigrants bypass central cities to settle in nearby communities. The second part, "Paying for Prosperity," discusses the lure of good schools in the newer suburbs, the educational expectations of parents in the newer suburbs, and the fact that these areas are ripe for demographic change. The third part, "Beyond Black and White," presents a history of demographic shifts in Clarkston High School in the Atlanta suburb of DeKalb County since racial integration, explaining that immigration is changing the face of the county's schools and examining language barriers in this suburb's schools. (SM)

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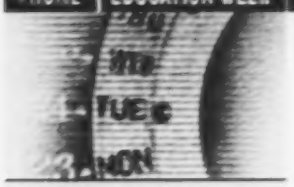

This Week's News

Features

October 18, 2000

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Remodeling Suburbia

2000 and beyond
The Changing Face Of American Schools

Suburban educators be warned: Your communities and schools are likely to change significantly in the coming years. Part 2 of Education Week's series on how public education will evolve in this new century focuses on the suburbs, home to the majority of Americans, by examining two communities in the Atlanta metropolitan area.

Remodeling Suburbia
Paying for Prosperity
Beyond Black and White
About This Series

In newer suburbs like Fayette County, Ga., enrollment is booming, and schools struggle to keep up with growth. Such areas should expect increasing diversity, demographers say, as Americans of different races and ethnic groups gain the means to purchase a piece of what is perceived as the good life.

In older suburbs, many of which already have seen dramatic demographic changes, enrollments may become more international as immigrants bypass central cities to settle in nearby communities. In DeKalb County, Ga., such a shift is challenging educators, who earlier saw enormous change as a result of school desegregation.

No matter the situation, the suburbs will change. They always have.

PHOTOS: Andrew Smola rides past one of the many spacious houses on his way to school in growing Fayette County, Ga.
—Robin Nelson

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Education Week

American Education's Newspaper of Record

October 18, 2000

Remodeling Suburbia

By Alan Richard
Education Week

Sure as the sun rises on every shopping mall and soccer field, America's suburbs will continue to grow and evolve, just as they have since someone paved the first cul de sac.

Where the suburbs are fast-expanding and new, fight as they may, communities may one day encounter the same shifts as their older suburban cousins: shuttered businesses, neighborhoods of increasing poverty, and new challenges for their schools.

2000 beyond
The Changing Face Of American Schools

Remodeling Suburbia

Paying for Prosperity

Beyond Black and White

About This Series

Older suburbs—already common victims of postsuburban blight—will continue to inherit the same qualities and hurdles as the cities they were built to outshine. They will become even more ethnically diverse than they are now, experts say, and some may empty of school-age children. Some may see revival and reinvestment.

If history teaches today's suburban school leaders anything, it's to expect vast change in their communities, no matter how bright or cloudy their current situations may be.

One trend seems certain: The homogeneity once associated with the suburbs will become increasingly a relic of the past, spurred by a new diversity of wealth among various racial, ethnic, and age groups.

And though the word "suburban" has carried with it the idea of a close relationship with a central city, Americans show signs of fanning out into new areas and ways of living not dependent on geographic ties, says the journalist and researcher Joel Garreau, who wrote the 1991 book *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* . Advances in technology, for example, are making it possible to shop, live, and learn in new ways.

"I'm anticipating the biggest revolution in how and where we live since the arrival of the automobile," Garreau says.

The suburbs of metropolitan Atlanta provide a snapshot of issues that experts say are likely to confront suburban school leaders in the years to come. Districts in Georgia are for the most part organized along county lines, giving administrators there a broader picture of demographic change.

Atlanta's suburban boom has been comparatively recent and rapid—the population of the metropolitan area grew 85 percent between 1970 and 1990. At the same time, developed land area increased 161 percent, creating vast new suburban areas and leaving older ones behind.

For school leaders in Fayette County—where only a few thousand people lived 30 years ago in small towns amid thick woods and farmland—the challenge is keeping up with the influx of families drawn by the schools' top-notch reputation.

In DeKalb County, an older suburb on Atlanta's east side that lost thousands of white students when busing for racial integration began, the story is considerably different. The population of foreign-born residents in the majority-black county has soared, presenting administrators with new challenges. In the remaining rural areas, meanwhile, expensive houses are sprouting as the South's black middle class grows.

The stories that follow take a closer look at these two districts.

Decline and Sprawl

Part of the growth of suburbs, to be sure, is fueled by the desire of many Americans to live near people who look the same as they do.

"We spend an awful lot of time and money moving away from each other," says Myron Orfield, a critic of suburban sprawl and the director of the Minneapolis-based Metropolitan Area Research Corp., a nonprofit organization that studies population shifts and how they affect services such as schools.

Whether race is the most important factor in people's choice of neighborhoods or not, their spreading out shows no sign of slowing, Orfield says. He argues that such sprawl—which is increasingly becoming a national, and not just local, political issue—is to blame for the decline of American cities.

When minority groups approach a majority of a school district's or county's population, Orfield says, property values tend to drop and test scores decline.

Some municipalities in DeKalb County typify that pattern. People who could afford to leave did so. Those who couldn't stayed behind and were joined by poorer families, creating rapid economic decline.

"It's a very sad story," Orfield says of such older suburban communities. "Houses go down in value, and as that happens ... they're back into the same situation as they were before. The people who moved into this community have to move again. There's no sign that it's changing."

Once thought of as bland, suburbia is becoming more and more racially, ethnically, and financially diverse.

Not everyone who studies demographic changes agrees with Orfield's pessimistic assessment. Garreau, a reporter for *The Washington Post* , says it's also important to examine where African-Americans, in particular, are moving, and how all sorts of people are choosing to live.

In the newest suburbs, he says, change may come in strange and unexpected ways. The population may begin to move out to more remote or smaller metropolitan areas, since many people will be able to work at home by computer, or commute to suburban offices only when they must.

Already, Americans have undergone profound changes in work and shopping patterns, Garreau points out, as they first moved their homes, and then their shops, to the suburbs. Now, an increasing numbers of jobs are located far from city centers, most often in the 183 places he calls "edge cities"—economic and social centers that have sprung up and flowered in the suburbs.

"Most of the explosive growth in new home construction is not in the traditional suburbs," Garreau says. People are moving to "the old country of the California Sierras, or the Big Sky country of Montana, or the Piedmont of North Carolina."

This fanning out also is spreading racial and ethnic minorities more evenly, Garreau argues. Rising income among African-American families and other minority groups will allow them access to the suburbs as never before, blending a school-age population that in many areas might have been almost entirely white.

"Two-thirds of the black population in America are not poor," Garreau emphasizes. "Whoever the hell thinks the suburbs are still white enclaves has not been to the mall lately."

'Leapfrogging' Professionals

What the future holds for the typical older suburb and its school system is up for debate.

"The level of racial and social segregation that's happening in the school system is going to put it at a disadvantage in terms of competition," Orfield warns.

But suburban areas also could forge entirely new identities, Garreau says. Just as central cities have again become cultural and entertainment stops for many suburbanites, older suburbs could see new uses for down-at-the-heel shopping centers and other commercial and public buildings.

International populations will continue to increase, demographers say, and it's a mistake to assume all of the newcomers will be poor and undereducated.

Harold L. Hodgkinson, the director of the center for demographic policy at the Institute for Educational Leadership, based in Washington, speaks of a "leapfrogging" of social classes and neighborhoods by some foreign-born professionals. Families' first entry to American society may be in middle- or upper-class neighborhoods, he says.

Certainly some immigrants, though, will be among the poorest of the poor, presenting schools systems in older suburban areas with more challenges than ever—without the tax base to support additional resources for students who need the most help.

Experts also disagree about how far the sprawl of development will reach and whether it will taper off in the foreseeable future.

"We keep on trying to repeat the past in a place that's as dynamic as the American suburb," Garreau says, "where the majority of us now live and work and play."

On the Web

"An Unofficial Timeline of Educational Events Relating to the Atlanta Public Schools," 1999.

Atlanta's changing demographics, from the Metropolitan Area Research Corp. Also read MARC's paper, "The Pattern of Metropolitan Polarization," which discusses population studies in Atlanta, Denver, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C.

Moving Beyond Sprawl: The Challenge for Metropolitan Atlanta , from the Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy.

"Crime Stats Point Out How Far Apart Suburbs, City of Atlanta Really Are" is a Nov. 14, 1997 editorial from *The Atlanta Business Chronicle* .

"The Atlanta Public School System: An Analysis of Financial Issues," from Research Atlanta. Research Atlanta also provides a page of links to other research about the Atlanta public school system.

"Cities, Suburbs and Schools: Would Citizens in Chicago, Cleveland and Milwaukee Support Greater Collaboration?," 1999, from Public Agenda, examines forms of regional cooperation other than busing. The study reports five key findings, among them that regional solutions do not naturally come to mind and that collaboration must be voluntary in order to succeed. (Requires Adobe's Acrobat Reader.)

In "Cities and Suburbs: Promoting Innovative Solutions to Community Problems," Ronald D. Utt discusses the decline of American cities and contends that the taking the popular "metropolitan" approach to planning—i.e., redefining cities to encompass broad metropolitan areas—may not be the solution for either cities or suburbs. Part of the Heritage Foundation's *Issues 2000, Candidate's Briefing Book* .

From the *Brookings Review* , Fall 1998, *The New Metropolitan Agenda* is a series of essays about the "new metropolitanism."(Requires Adobe's Acrobat Reader.)

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development discusses its 21st Century Agenda for Cities and Suburbs: Promoting Smarter Growth and Livable Communities. The initiative provides incentives to promote and implement regional strategies and solutions and a grant program for "community-centered schools."

PHOTOS: Andrew Smola, right, and his friends wait for the school bus in Fayette County, Ga., a fast-growing Atlanta suburb where high-scoring schools are a major attraction.
DeKalb and Fayette counties in the Atlanta area exemplify trends facing suburbs.
—Robin Nelson

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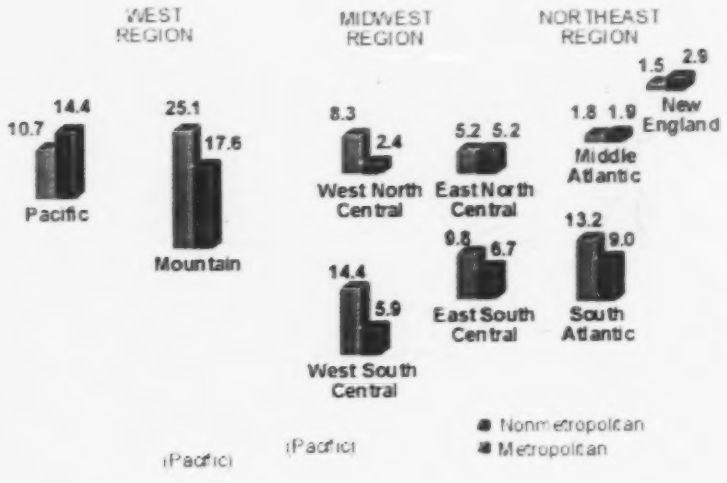
The Growth of Metropolitan Regions

Education Week

In the majority of regions, the population grew by a greater percentage between 1990 and 1998 in metropolitan areas, which include suburbs, than in outlying communities.



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Education Week

American Education's Newspaper of Record

October 18, 2000

Paying for Prosperity

By Alan Richard
Education Week

Tyrone, Ga.

Remodeling Suburbia
Paying for Prosperity
Beyond Black and White
About This Series

The curb where 12-year-old Andrew Smola sits waiting for the bus wasn't a curb at all when he was born. This neighborhood of manicured, lush green lawns and two-story houses with long driveways was then thick Georgia woods, laced with a swampy bog, where hunters stomped behind their dogs, chasing deer and rabbits.

Not much about Fayette County is the same as it was when Andrew was born. This chunk of land south of Atlanta has begun to resemble many other places in the United States, with its shopping plazas, traffic snarls, and spreading pads of pavement and vinyl siding.

The old Peeples property down by Starr's Mill is now home to three sparkling-new schools, with so much brick and concrete they look like an upscale shopping mall. If leaders of the 19,500-student district have their way, county voters will pass a $65 million bond referendum next month to build four schools and renovate several more.

But passage isn't assured. Voters have turned down two sales-tax hikes for schools in the past two years. The growing pains in Fayette County are likely to echo in other American communities as districts struggle to keep up with the relentless march to newer communities.

- **Population:** 90,900
- **Public School enrollment:** 19, 500
- **Student profile:** 83 percent white, 12 percent black, 2 percent Hispanic, 3 percent Asian/Pacific Islander
- **Percentage of students who receive free or discounted meats:** 6.7
- **Median household income:** $50,000
- **Big change:** Enrollment has increased from fewer than 3,5000 students in 1970.

The Smola family's town of Tyrone may one day grow to the size of Peachtree City, the newest and largest town in Fayette County, a planned city with one of Georgia's highest rates of personal income and reputedly more golf carts per person than any other community in America.

By the time Andrew and his classmates enroll in college, he likely won't recognize the suburb where he grew up.

Lure of Good Schools

For Janet Smola, Andrew's mother, the lure of Fayette County was its schools.

The district's reputation has helped swell its enrollment from fewer than 3,500 students in 1970 to nearly 20,000 today.

Smola, a seven-year resident who ran unopposed this fall for the school board, intends to help manage the growth that's transforming her adopted home county. A 48-year-old independent professional fund-raiser, she's proud of the district's well-trained teachers, generally new schools, manageable class sizes, and well-supplied classrooms.

Since the Smolas enrolled their three boys here after a move from Connecticut for Michael Smola's job as a division comptroller for Delta Airlines, they haven't been disappointed.

"I had heard the school systems in the South didn't hold a candle to the school systems in the North," Janet Smola says. "I did not notice a disparity."

Debbie Condon, who leaves office next month after eight years on the Fayette County board of education—the past two as its chairwoman—says planning for growth is a big part of what Smola will face as a district policymaker.

"I didn't know I'd have to be knowledgeable about sewer systems, roads, and construction contracts," says Condon, an assistant dean at the Georgia Military College campus in nearby Fulton County.

The county's reputation as a top district draws residents—and puts pressure on schools to keep up.

Fayette County's population has surged from a sleepy 11,000 in 1970—easily the smallest of any Atlanta-area county—to more than 90,000 today. Planners expect the population to reach about 200,000 in the next 10 years, swelled by the region's continued prosperity and Fayette's proximity to large employers such as the Atlanta-Hartsfield International Airport, one of the world's busiest, just north of the Fayette County border.

The growth in population and enrollment has brought more students, more cars, more houses, and a demand for more schools to Fayette, keeping constant pressure on Superintendent John DeCotis and the school board.

"People are used to instant solutions," says DeCotis, now in his second year as superintendent. "But when you are trying to solve a school problem, it's complicated."

DeCotis, 47, who arrived here from upstate New York on a Greyhound bus 21 years ago to teach, recalls that Fayette was a different place then. "It really was a poor county back in the days before and after World War II," he says in his Fayetteville office, "really up until the late 1960s and early 1970s."

Fortunately for the Fayette schools' tax base, businesses have blossomed here as well as houses. The warehouses at the industrial sites near Peachtree City are filled with companies from around the world. Taxpayers also have been reasonably open to paying for new schools, approving a bond referendum in 1994 that allowed construction of five schools, including the Starr's Mill complex.

But the need for new schools may finally be catching up with the Fayette County tax base, still modest in comparison with those of Atlanta's larger suburban counties. Taxpayers twice this year rejected a penny sales-tax hike on purchases made in Fayette County. The money was to be used to build new schools and enlarge several others.

Another request for money comes next month, when voters will be asked to approve the $65 million bond referendum. The need is so great that even some of the district's newest schools have portable classrooms. More than 100 such classrooms are in use countywide.

Smola hopes that this time, taxpayers will see the need is real. Growth here really has just begun, she says, and if voters refuse to invest in the respected schools that are luring people to homes in Fayette County, she warns, "we are going to dim the shining star that brought them here in the first place."

'They Expect a Lot'

When Andrew Smola, who is in 7th grade, strolls into the library at Flat Rock Middle School, more than 20 computers await him. A parent volunteer roams the room, shelving magazines. An artist stands atop a platform, painting a mural on the wall. Andrew sits down and begins to type as fast as an adult who works on computers every day.

The schools here in Fayette County have one of the best academic reputations in Georgia. Andrew and his brothers, Zach, who is in 10th grade, and Evan, a high school senior, know they attend the kind of schools some kids dream of.

The migration of people from all over the country has required many of the county's longtime educators to stay fresh.

"They do expect us to do a lot with their kids," Sandra Watson, the principal of Peeples Elementary School, says of the many families moving into the Starr's Mill community. "There's no faking it. You have to know what you're doing."

Twenty years ago, test scores began to rise slowly in Fayette County. This year, its high schools have the highest SAT average in the state: 1046 combined math and verbal, compared with the national average of 1019 out of a possible 1600. Georgia's average is 974.

"The clientele has changed, and we've adjusted," says Pam Riddle, an administrator who oversees the county's elementary schools.

Janet Smola recognizes that success with test scores and scholarships can't be completely attributed to the schools. She knows stay-at- home mothers who have advanced degrees—a pediatrician and a biologist—and are able to reinforce what their children learn at school. The parental support pays off: Nine of 10 Fayette students enroll in college.

Al Gilbert, a county planning commissioner and the sales manager for a building-supply company, laments some of the changes occurring in Fayette County as it grows, but he loves the schooling his children have received. Gilbert's son, a freshman at West Georgia College, recently told his father about a math class he was taking.

"He said, 'Daddy, I had this course in the 8th grade,' " reports Gilbert, a native of nearby Newnan in Coweta County.

If voters turn down a bond referendum, "we are going to dim the shining star that brought them here in the first place."

Janet Smola,
Fayette County resident

"I sometimes wish we could go back to a little smaller size of school," says Gilbert, who recalls fondly the days when Fayette County High was the only high school here. Now, there are five.

The county has grown so rapidly, in fact, that Smola joins Gilbert and their friends and acquaintances in joking that no one is "from" Fayette County. Even native Georgians, it seems, moved here from neighboring counties.

Ripe for Demographic Change

Smola sometimes worries about the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the community where her children are growing up. But when Andrew turned 12 this year, she relaxed. "Twenty-eight 12- year-old boys in the back yard with their BMX bikes," she says, "and there were just as many black faces as white ones. They didn't seem to notice the difference."

The district's enrollment was 83 percent white, 12 percent black, 2 percent Hispanic, and 3 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, according to the U.S. Department of Education's most recent data. But planners here say indicators suggest Fayette is ripe for demographic change. Development officials say expensive housing will bar less well-off families from relocating here, but for those with means, regardless of race, the schools are a powerful magnet.

At 11 percent, the county already has a larger proportion of minority residents than other affluent, suburban counties in metropolitan Atlanta. Nearly half the schoolchildren in the metropolitan area come from non-Asian minority groups, and many live within a short ride of Fayette's borders.

On the county's northern border, closest to Atlanta, is its first majority-black elementary school. The new neighborhoods surrounding it resemble the Smolas', but are filled with middle- and upper-middle-class black families.

Fayette County has the nation's third-fastest growing Hispanic population, even though the total is still small—only 3,500. The number of such residents is up 246 percent since 1990.

"Our community as a whole is becoming more diverse as people from different countries move here," Superintendent DeCotis says. "And we have some international businesses."

To be sure, Fayette lacks many hallmarks of more established regions. Officials here say they need a community college to train workers, housing for people with modest incomes who work in restaurants, shops, and homes around Fayette County, and more roads and public transportation for a population expected to double in the next 20 years.

It's only a matter of time, then, before the neighborhood where Andrew awaits the bus each day will change.

"Fayette is going to be overrun with people trying to wedge their way in there," says Myron Orfield, a Minneapolis-based expert on urban planning who has studied the Atlanta region. "Everybody's going to want to be there."

On the Web

Know Atlanta , a relocation guide, provides statistics and information on Fayette County.

The Smart Growth Network provides a state-by-state update on growth initiatives. Read about Georgia's participation.

The Fayette County Board of Education provides information on the proposed bond referendum.

PHOTOS: Janet Smola, helping her three sons get ready for school, will help manage growth as a member of the Fayette County school board.
Janet Smola and her husband, Michael, at home with son Andrew, hope that voters pass a bond referendum next month to keep up with Fayette County's growth.
A previous bond issue helped build a complex of schools that Superintendent John DeCotis, above, can be proud of. The New York state native has seen the county change from a relatively poor area to one of affluence.
—Robin Nelson

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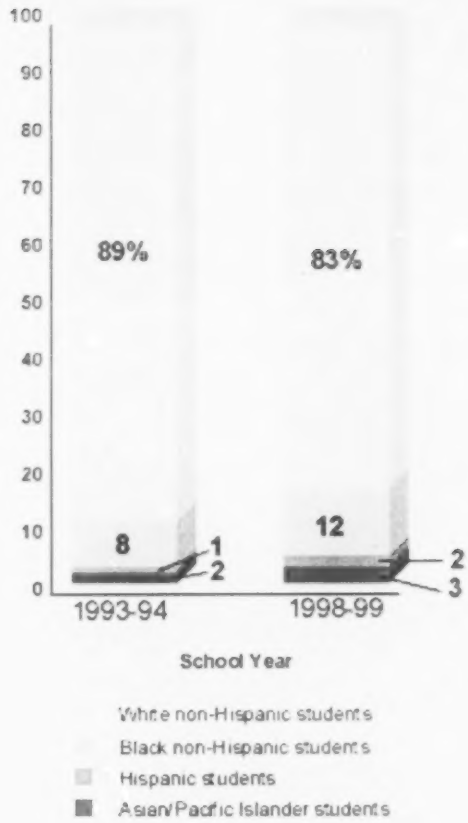
Fayette Enrollment Trends

Education Week

The district's enrollment has changed as the number of nonwhite students has increased.



NOTE: American Indian/Alaskan students accounted for less than two tenths of a percent of the school district population for these years.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey Data.

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Education Week

American Education's Newspaper of Record

October 18, 2000

Beyond Black and White

By Alan Richard
Education Week

Clarkston, Ga.

Remodeling Suburbia

Paying for Prosperity

Beyond Black and White

About This Series

Charlie Henderson never expected this. The principal of Clarkston High School in the Atlanta suburb of DeKalb County thought he'd seen it all.

Even his 30 years in the 96,000-student Georgia district didn't prepare him for the changes now taking place at his high school, a two-story, tan-brick building built in the 1950s, half an hour's drive from downtown Atlanta unless traffic backs up.

These days, the world has come to DeKalb.

The student enrollment at Clarkston High, once virtually all African-American, has been transformed in the past six years into an international community. Nearly half the 1,475 students, in fact, are children whose traditions and beliefs are foreign to Henderson and many of his co-workers. Some of the students were born in Bosnia, Vietnam, and Eritrea, among the 54 countries and 47 languages found here.

"I only thought there were two colors, two races," says Henderson, a veteran of the county's struggle to integrate its schools.

Henderson's experience here is likely to repeat itself in communities across the country, experts say, as immigrants increasingly settle in older, established suburbs rather than central cities. The changes, he says, have taught him some important lessons.

- **Population:** 610,000
- **Public school enrollment:** 96,000 (Decatur city schools enroll 2,660 separately.)
- **Student profile:** 77 percent black, 14 percent white, 5 percent Hispanic, 4 percent Asian/Pacific Islander
- **Percentage of students who receive free or discounted meals:** 50
- **Median household income:** $36,000
- **Big change:** Nearly 30,000 people born outside the U.S. have moved here since 1990.

"I'm just going to tell you the God's honest truth," Henderson, 52, says of working with his diverse population. "It's been the most pleasant experience I've ever had in my life."

A History of Demographic Shifts

DeKalb County, an anomaly in some ways among older suburban communities, has already seen its share of change. It is one of only 24 counties in the nation—two in the South—with a population of more than 500,000 made up predominantly of members of minority groups, according to Woods & Poole Economics Inc., a Washington-based research firm.

In a region where most African-Americans traditionally have been poor, incomes have never fallen in DeKalb. Its average personal-income level is among the upper tier of counties in Georgia.

The county's suburbs were settled largely by whites fleeing Atlanta in the years immediately following the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision declaring unlawful the "separate but equal" schooling of black youngsters. DeKalb grew so fast that the district dedicated 47 new schools in the four years following the decision.

By 1968, black enrollment had begun to rise, and black parents seeking to desegregate the county's schools filed a lawsuit; it was not settled until 1996. One year after busing for racial integration began in 1970, the county's white enrollment began to drop, and it has never stopped.

The combination of an aging white population and white families moving out of DeKalb for newer, larger homes in the outlying suburbs cut enrollment sharply. In 1986, it bottomed out at less than 72,000—10,000 fewer students than in 1969.

The district closed several schools.

Thirty years after integration, immigration is changing the face of the county's schools yet again.

"There are 15 houses on my cul de sac, and we once had 25 to 30 kids in school," says Doyle F. Oran, who is the district's chief planner. Now, no households on the street have school-age children.

Hardest hit by the population shifts were municipalities such as Clarkston, which suffered an economic decline as many wealthier residents moved to outlying communities. But DeKalb also boasts affluent communities, such as Druid Hills near Emory University, and is experiencing a boom in new housing in its rural outer areas. District enrollment has increased by 22,000 since 1990, fueled in part by an influx into the county of nearly 30,000 people born outside the United States, and in part by well-to-do black families.

Once a study in black and white, the district is now 77 percent black, 14 percent white, 5 percent Hispanic, and 4 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. Fifteen thousand students were born outside the United States, and last school year, about 3,000 were enrolled in classes for non-English-speakers.

"People are moving back," says Mary Stimmel, a native of Atlanta and former local television reporter who handles public relations for the DeKalb County schools and has made it a hobby to track the district's evolution.

Many people Stimmel has met are black families returning to a more prosperous South, after their parents or grandparents moved North for jobs and to escape the social turmoil of the times. "The South is finally having its migration," she says.

Signs of the influx are evident between the town of Lithonia and the edge of Atlanta, on a four-lane highway that runs through open fields now being filled with a new middle school and neighborhoods like Hawthorne Woods, where the starting price for a two-story house with a porch is $120,000. Open-house signs mark the street corners.

Eleven new schools, in fact, are under construction in the district. Most of the funding comes from a countywide sales tax that voters approved specifically for school construction in 1997. The tax ends in 2002; meanwhile, DeKalb needs three new high schools and several other schools in the next few years.

Language Barriers

With the new foreign-born population has come quite a challenge for principals and teachers, many of whom remember the struggles over integration. "It was not an easy adjustment for anybody," Clarkston High's Henderson says of the desegregation era. "Certain teachers felt they were hired to teach one type of kid."

Now, they are faced with the task of teaching a far more varied group of students. "The language barrier is a major instructional problem for us," Henderson says.

In response, DeKalb County has formed teams of leading educators to advise low-scoring schools on ways to improve. At Clarkston, administrators are more involved with teachers—insisting, for example, that time not be wasted by showing videotapes, that every classroom minute be used for instruction. The district has hired 150 teachers to help students learn English, a record high.

"We've moved from being complacent to increasing expectations," says Scott Butler, 55, a seasoned DeKalb administrator and the associate principal at Clarkston.

The county's public schools run the academic gamut, from affluent high schools like Chamblee and Druid Hills that beat the national average on the SAT this year, to Clarkston, where scores have fallen four of the past five years.

At Avondale High School, Principal Tim Freeman is struck by the many changes his father would not recognize. Here at the edge of the county near Atlanta, marked by countless aging apartment complexes, life is much different from when Freeman's father, Robert, was DeKalb's school superintendent for 16 years, until 1995.

One county principal says working in an increasingly diverse school has been enriching.

In the late 1970s, when the Freemans moved to the area from Pueblo, Colo., seven of every 10 DeKalb students were white, and most lived in houses with more than one TV set and a mother who didn't have an outside job.

On a recent fall day, Tim Freeman sits in his office, within sight of an empty shopping mall, and takes a telephone call that he hopes will reveal some details about a student who wants to enroll, but has no paperwork and finds himself homeless.

"The world keeps busting in on us," he says. "It makes teaching and learning a little more complicated," continues Freeman, a portly, soft-spoken man in his first year as principal here. He's serious about making his new school better for his 1,200 students, 90 percent of whom are black, with the remainder from various ethnic backgrounds. "There's no excuse for us not to get on a path of school improvement," he says.

Trickles of change also are arriving at Shamrock Middle School, a converted high school built in 1968 deep within a wooded neighborhood of brick houses. A slight majority of the 1,380 students are white, most of the rest are black, and about one in 10 are Hispanic, Pacific Islander, or of some other background.

"I have a wonderful amalgam of kids. When I walk down my hallways, it's the real world," boasts Principal Tom Davis, a serious sort who stands in the corridors to greet his students.

In his four years at Shamrock, Davis, 43, has noticed marked demographic change. "I've got some girls who were gun-toting soldiers" in their native countries, he says.

Worried that some international students might not feel at home, he called a meeting recently and asked how he could make the school more welcoming, besides the ordinary middle school hallmarks of a cheerful lobby, a friendly staff of adults, and a commitment to both academics and nurturing.

Davis was surprised at the response: "They all just stared at me. This one little boy in the class said, 'We're fine. We do feel a part of Shamrock.'"

On the Web

Visit the DeKalb County Public Schools.

"Atlanta Megasprawl," Fall 1999, from the Forum for Applied Research and Public Policy. "In the fastest growing human development in history, the burden of sprawl falls heaviest on the disadvantaged," say the authors.

PHOTOS: Charlie Henderson talks with teenagers at Clarkston High School, where classrooms have an international flavor. Working in an increasingly diverse school has been enriching, he says.
The increasing diversity in DeKalb County is reflected in this sign outside a shopping center, advertising food and services for an international clientele.
—Robin Nelson

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Education Week

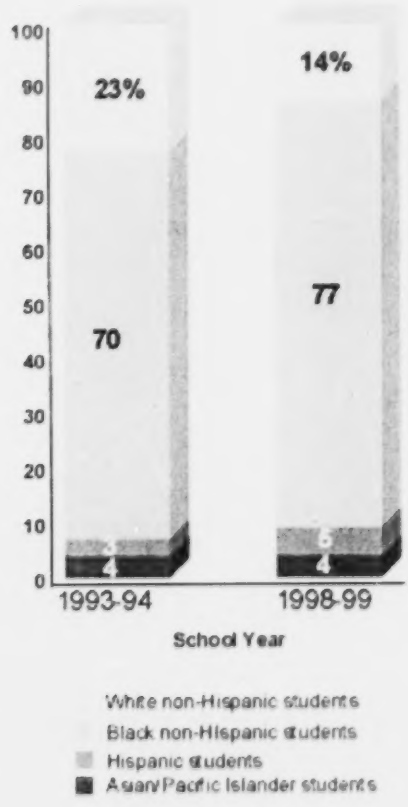
American Education's Newspaper of Record

October 18, 2000

DeKalb Enrollment Trends

Education Week

The district is enrolling more black students, in part because African-American families have migrated back to the South.



NOTE: American Indian/Alaskan students accounted for less than two-tenths of a percent of the school district population for these years.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey Data.

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